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The *Abhidharma-Kośa* of Vasubandhu – Ontology and
Cosmology
Atomism in Buddhism

by

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ABSTRACT OF PHD THESIS

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THE *ABHIDHARMA-KOŚA* OF VASUBANDHU – ONTOLOGY AND COSMOLOGY

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ABSTRACT OF PHD THESIS

The objective of my thesis is to present the philosophical perspective of *abhidharma*, the fundamental doctrine of Indo-Tibetan Buddhism. Of the diversified syllabus of the field, emphasis is put on the cosmogony-cosmology theory preserved in a scholastic context, and the concept of atomism is further analysed. Philosophical questions related to the topic such as causality, time, motion, ethical implications of understanding of matter and other, relevant fields are also detailed. The expression *abhidharma* refers to the systematic philosophy of Buddhism, the ontological and epistemological parts of which are especially significant, with the presentation of analysis of empirical knowledge, grouping and systematization of experimental elements (*dharma*), cognitive functions and causal relations in its focus. Based on textual findings, *abhidharma*, as an independent exegetical tradition can be detected with certainty from the 3rd century BC. The encyclopaedic work of Vasubandhu (4th century CE), titled *Abhidharma-kośa* (AK) is one of the most significant philosophical text of Indic-rooted Buddhism. Its relevant passages were used as primary resources for the present research.

Buddhist cosmology serves primarily soteriological goals, and, in accordance, *abhidharma* describes the metaphysical world as a system of subjectively determined empirical factors. I wish to support this statement by the detailed presentation of the way in which archaic mythologemes are incorporated into the description of the cosmos and how it is reinterpreted as the ethically defined system of existential conditions of the individual.

Similar to the ethical implications of cosmological questions, analysis of matter, as much as atomism, has doctrinal roots, which sprout in the soil of North-Western Indian multilingual culture through the metaphysical expansion of introspection experience. The theory was developed by Buddhist scholasticism through strict interpretation of early doctrines of Buddha, and, as textual findings show, gained its form described in the present thesis as a result of longish disputes. The theory's cosmological and natural philosophical aspects are the first to meet the eye, and only by meticulous analysis is it possible to reveal its deeper content. After having been compared to Indic and Greek theories that appeared to be parallel based on formal, conceptual and functional aspects, this new concept was proven to have been inspired by several resources and still be regarded as one of a kind. My research clearly showed that, as regards its primary aim and development, the understanding of matter behind Buddhist atomism is focussed on epistemology rather than cosmology, that is, based on an archaic tradition where there is no clear division between cosmogony-cosmology and cognition, but knowing of their entirety represented the kernel of wisdom.

Vasubandhu, the author of the Sanskrit language *Abhidharma-kośa* dated to the 4th century, and its commentators were apparently striving to consistently interweave the diverse elements of the theory, which, from a certain point of view, can be regarded a successful accomplishment, but questions have been raised in relation to it. Still, the theory has been canonised and formally integrated into the scholastic description of matter.

Beyond the general presentation of the *abhidharma*, another one of my objectives was, based on genuine Sanskrit and Indic commentaries and by relying on 8th century classical Tibetan translations and subsequent commentaries, to make a close interpretation of the relevant passages, on the basis of which atomism of the *Abhidharma-kośa* and the related cosmological, anthropological and soteriological concepts are described as well as its philosophical role and significance in the given context.

It was my objective during the compilation of the present work to put the discussed philosophical questions as relevant to non-Indologists as well, and, as a result, to have this important section of knowledge history regarded as a non-negligible participant of the universal philosophical dispute.

The topic being greatly versatile, only a fraction of the processed material is presented here, the apparent Greek-Hellenistic parallelisms, however, will also be referred to.

While doing my research, a surprising fact was revealed. The AK's locus (AK 2.22) discussing the main feature of atomism is represented in secondary literature in a greatly contradictory way. In my opinion, the relation of the atom and its constituents is misinterpreted by the researcher-translators, which is partly the result of the complex nature of the concept, and can partly be attributed to an early commentary as well as to the features of Chinese translations.

Resources

The present work was based on Sanskrit and classical Tibetan texts: primarily canonical papers, commentaries, Vasubandhu-biographies and doxography related to *abhidharma*, works attributed to Vasubandhu, all basically up to the time of Vasubandhu, but also with a short account of his direct Indic and certain subsequent important Tibetan commentators.

In a narrow sense, of the works attributed to Vasubandhu, the subject of the present study is represented primarily by the Sanskrit text of *Abhidharma-kośa-kārikā* and *-bhāṣya* (AK) and it's Tibetan version (*Chos-mngon-pa'i mdzod-kyi tshig-le'ur byas-pa*, and *Chos-mngon pa'i mdzod-kyi bshad-pa*), all available publications of which I aimed to take into account.

As secondary resources to my work, studies of modern time researchers on the history of the philosophy of Buddhism, on Indic sholastics, the school of *sarvāstivāda-vaibhāṣika*, on Vasubandhu and *abhidharma*, as well as on certain relevant antique Greek philosophical problems were relied on.

Methodology

Based on the resource texts, preferably their critical editions or original manuscripts, primarily the central notions of the subject are examined. The earliest studied texts can be dated to the 2nd and 3rd centuries AD, their antecedents going back at least to the 3rd century BC. Starting from their being written down for the first time, these texts were continuously being copied, as the traditional and reasonable method for preserving them in climatic conditions of India. Therefore, when reconstructing the ideas text deterioration must also be taken into account. I deployed the established tools of philological research: careful grammatical analysis of hardly comprehensible parts, close reading with the least preconceptions and minimum hypothesis possible; establishment of relevant context; translation of the most important sections to Hungarian. Sanskrit and Tibetan versions and commentaries of the relevant *loci*, and the loosely connected canonical and post-canonical texts were compared, taking into account the available translations and studies but not restricted by them. I was aiming at exploration and terminological interpretation of correspondences in history of ideas. Being a work of philosophical nature, examination of coherence proved to be an important guideline: I assumed that the author was competent and well-intentioned, that is, was aiming to create a text devoid of contradictions. The depth achieved by exploitation of philological tools is often sufficient to get a clear picture regarding the investigated problem. In certain instances, however, only after several tries can the philosophical content of a text be revealed. Following this methodology, I aimed at making close and at the same time exact interpretation based on Sanskrit and Tibetan texts, which will serve as a basis for raising further questions and finding more conclusions. The texts were evaluated from a wider angle as well and looked at in the complexity of tradition, since, in my experience, applying a broader perspective often facilitates a deeper comprehension of complex concepts and thoughts.

The above mentioned concepts are basically discussed from a descriptive point of view. Although exploration of knowledge history relations is outside the scope of the present work, I was striving to present certain antecedents of the atom theory not only at the level of textual occurrence but also in its theoretical context. The process through which dozens of Buddhist philosophy schools formulated their individual standpoints regarding the most important theoretical questions can be traced from the 3rd century BC.

Results

In the course of the study deeper interrelations within the text came to light. I made the translations of passages relevant for atomism, which are included in the Appendix. By their interpretation, the concept of atomism and several other related notions have become clear.

It was revealed through my research that, contrary to the molecular interpretation and substantialist approach found in secondary literature as well as in classical commentaries and translations, according to the theory of atomism depicted in *Abhidharma-kośa*, the atom (*paramāṇu*) can be defined in three aspects: 1. as the ultimate, theoretical border (*paryanta*) of the reduction of matter, further irreducible material entity with no parts; 2. as resistant, space occupying basic unit of material objects (*rūpa*), including live bodies, at the same time the smallest material measure that lacks spatial directions; 3. and finally as space-time unity of inherent, coefficient qualities-functions (*aṣṭa-dravyaka*). A special feature of this theory is that it holds that atoms comprising a sentient body have the unique quality of *sensing* as an elementary constituent. On the other hand, an atom holds the complexity of sensation qualities, which manifest only in the space of attention directed on them. Subatomic factors (*dravyas*) are not autonomous, substantial entities, not independent “atoms”, but naturally coexisting and coefficient material function-types. The material of the atom cannot be separated from these subatomic factors and cannot be set as an autonomous substrate independent of its features. The features are not static qualities but are functions: the general experience of the material’s operations is exemplified in them.

It is possible that this atom concept emerged as an impact and parallel to the development of the phenomenalist approach of the Buddhist metaphysics. The author-commentator of *Abhidharma-kōśa*, in the course of discussing these questions, expresses an opinion that projects his later radical idealistic approach. The maintaining of the reality of atoms, however, is founded by the very fact that, being constituents of sense-objects, they serve as sources of perception, and perception is an empirical fact. On the other hand, the atom is something that, at the ultimate reduction of the adequate analysis of material entities will remain as the bearer of clear materiality.

Trough grammatical analysis of the related passages, considering the wide contextual affiliations of notions, and by comparative analysis of parallel works of Buddhist commentators, I argue that the reception of atom theory, formulated in AK 2.22 has an arbitrary interpretation of Vasubandhu’s concept, using (*saṃghāta*)-*paramāṇu* in the sense of "molecule", contrasting it with *dravya-paramāṇu*. The misperception of Vasubandhu’s intention was suggested by Samghabhadra (5th c.) and has its clear formulation in Yaśomitra’s Sanskrit language commentary (6th c.) on AK. The Epicurean concept, however, could have played a role in the development of this theory, as well as in its misinterpretation. It is this approach that is reflected by the Chinese translation of Xuánzàng (7th century), which was later the basis for the French translation made by Louis de La Vallée-Poussin between 1923 and 1931, before the original Sanskrit text was found. The interpretation he held was not questioned by subsequent Western translators, partly due to his authority, and partly because this perception of atomism coincides with the well-known corpuscular atom model.